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ABSTRACT

At Florida's Miami-Dade Community College, a service learning component was implemented in a reading course designed to prepare students to pass the statewide test required to obtain an associate degree. In the service learning option, students were required to perform 15 hours of tutoring in reading to at-risk elementary students or adults, maintain a journal, participate in reflection sessions, and prepare a final project. Journal assignments consisted of a brief description of daily activities, reflections, responses to articles, evaluations of their tutoring by site teachers, and samples of work from the individuals they tutored. The reflection sessions provided students with an opportunity to share their feelings and experiences with the class. For their end projects, students were able to choose from writing a two-page summary of their experience, presenting a 3- to 5-minute oral report, or submitting a creative response project. The challenges for the instructor in implementing the component included ensuring student placement in tutoring positions, balancing the service learning component with the class material needed to cover the course competencies, training students to tutor, dealing with the changes in the scope of student tutoring made by the individual schools and teachers, and measuring the students' success. Benefits included continued interaction with the individuals tutored; the discovery of the importance of volunteer work to the community; and for the instructor, meeting other teachers and feeling closer to the students. (TGI)

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# Service Learning: A Summary of a Semester

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## THE FIRST DAY

"Service is the price we pay for living." I agree with Marian Wright Edelman, and last semester, these are the very first words my students heard me say. Did they have any idea what I meant? Most of them did not, but by the end of the semester, they certainly would or at least I hoped so at the time. I remember standing in the front of my class on the first day discussing all the benefits of service learning. I spoke confidently, convincing them this would be one of the best experiences of their college careers. But as I was speaking, all the doubts I had, and they were many, were buzzing in my head. I thought, "These students go to school full-time, and most of them work full-time. They have families to support; some of them are single parents. What if they do not have the time to do their hours? What if they do not have transportation to the schools...," and finally, "How am I going to train fifty students to tutor elementary school children when they have no teaching experience?"

## BEGINNING THE SERVICE LEARNING PROGRAM: THE PLAN

I had always been interested in service learning. Having graduated from college in the not so distant past myself, I am keenly aware of how self-involved some college students can be. A college campus can become a whole world to some students to the extent that they have no idea what is going on in the community around them. This was something I wanted to help change, especially since the mission of a community college is to serve the whole community. The opportunity for me to integrate service into my classroom came about when the North Campus of Miami-Dade Community College got its own Service Learning Center. I obtained information from the Service Learning Coordinator, went to a state conference, and wrote and received a mini-grant to initiate a service learning program in two of my five classes. I was teaching REA 1105, which is a perfect class for service. REA 1105 was designed to get students reading at the college level, and although it is not really a college-prep course, skills are weak. The class was developed to help prepare students to take the CLAST, a state wide test that must be passed before they can receive their A.A. degrees. Retention is often low in this class. The work can be hard and sometimes tedious, and students often do not see the point of the class. Integrating a service component into this class achieved one of my main goals which was to have my students improve their own reading skills as they tutored others.

I decided to offer the service learning component as an option in my class. I wanted to try service learning out before I made it a requirement. So, I designed my syllabus in two parts, Option A and Option B. Option A included the service learning component. The requirements for this option were 15 hours of service, (in this case, tutoring reading), a journal which was broken up into four sections, participation in at least two official reflection sessions, and a final project. For the volunteer hours my students were allowed to choose from a short list of agencies which had been developed for me by the Service Learning Coordinator, Dominique Bony. Most of the agencies served at-risk elementary school students, although the list did have two agencies that worked with adults. Moreover, Dominque arranged for several of the agencies to come in on the second and third day of class to give presentations about their services and to answer any questions that the students may have had.

Option B was the non-service option. It was a Reading Portfolio that was designed to get students familiar with doing research in the library using encyclopedias, periodicals, microfilm,

etc. It also included reading and analyzing several editoriais from the newspaper and doing a short oral report.

On the first day, I discussed both options and distributed a detailed syllabus and the list of the service agencies. I told the students that they could listen to the various presentations made by the agencies and then decide on an option. Moreover, I stressed that once they made their decision, they had to follow through with their commitment until the end of the semester.

## GETTING STARTED

My fears stared to wane after the first week. All but two students in two classes decided that they would give the service option a try. Now the actual work started for them -- and for me. Almost all of the 45 students chose the same agency, the All Aboard Tutoring Program. The All Aboard Tutoring Program is a drop-out prevention program that provides individualized, one-on-one tutoring for kindergarten and first graders deemed at-risk at 35 elementary schools throughout Dade County. It was advantageous that most students chose this agency because this helped to alleviate my fears about the transportation problem. All Aboard helped Dominique place all the students at schools in their neighborhoods.

The agency also helped train the students. They gave an hour long workshop that discussed issues with which my students might be faced and how they should react. They also discussed the practical logistics like signing in and out, keeping their weekly hour report, and the students' basic responsibilities. Each of my students was assigned to a teacher who in turn would assign him or her to a child who had weak reading skills.

## MEETING THE CHALLENGES

Getting all the students placed was a bit of a challenge. The students had to take the initiative to contact the counselor at the school they had chosen. It was necessary for me to assure that my students knew that they had to start tutoring immediately, since I had designed the program based on the idea that the students would go to the schools on a regular basis and not do all their hours in a few days. Also, elementary school counselors are busy people, and it was sometimes a challenge to get them to even call my students back.

Secondly, I struggled with how much time I could afford to spend reflecting on the students' service experiences and the general organizational details of the project and still give enough attention to the material I needed to cover for the course competencies. I deliberated at length about this, but overall, I think I developed a nice balance. Some of the articles in the text that I used for REA 1105 lent themselves to discussions on topics that go well with a service oriented class. I also used a supplemental text that I bought with my grant money, Writing For Change, by Ann Waters and Marjorie Ford. As part of their journal, students selected readings from this text and reflected on them, keeping their own service experiences in mind.

Lastly, training the students to tutor worked out well. The workshop All Aboard gave was helpful. They also provided my students with a packet of handouts and games they could use with their mentees. I gave the students some basic guidelines about choosing appropriate books for the children and lists of all the Caldecott and Newbery award winning books, which they could get at the library. I tried to stress the importance of preparing all their materials before they met with their students. I also suggested that they meet with their children in a quiet place such as the

library, rather than staying in the classroom. Other than this advice, my students were on their own.

I like to think that they got many of their ideas from me. For example, I do a lot of group work in my classes, believing strongly that students can learn much from each other. One day, one of my students, Maydine, came to my office to discuss how her service was progressing. She told me she loved her student Mikey and could not get over how much fun she had when she tutored him. She said she had Mikey doing some group work. When I expressed my surprise, she explained that she had had a problem getting Mikey to sit still while she was reading to him and going over some of the words, but when she promised that he'd be able to read the same book to some of the students in the class, he was more attentive. The teacher chose a small group for Mikey to "teach" and this worked great. From then on, Mikey was excited to see Maydine each week, and his skills improved considerably since he had to really learn the material in order to be able to teach it to the other children. Not only that, Maydine was so excited by his progress; she went more often and ended up doing much more than her required 15 hours. In addition, my students invented word games and made up flash cards for their mentees, both techniques I also use in my reading classes when working on vocabulary. I give my students extra credit points for certain tasks; my students gave their children candy, stickers, or promises to come more often. All these strategies worked successfully.

The only problems I did encounter did not arise from the students in my classes. They came from the schools where my students were placed. Several of the schools did not have a true understanding of the mission of the All Aboard Tutoring Program. This program is based on individualized help. My students were told they would be tutoring one student. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Several of my students were assigned groups of children by their teachers. When this problem came to my attention and I questioned the students involved, they said they did not mind having the extra students because the need was so great. But when some of the teachers started to have my students tutor subjects that had nothing to do with reading, such as math, I discussed the problem with someone from All Aboard. Another problem I encountered was that some students did not get to work with the same child all the way through the semester. My students were not able to make as much progress with their mentees when this happened for the obvious reasons. One disturbing example of this was a case that my student Mabel wrote about in her journal. She had been assigned to a boy named Alex, who had just lost his mother. He was quiet and withdrawn when Mabel started working with him, but as he came out of his shell, Mabel found that Alex's reading skills were, in fact, good. He started to be more communicative with each session and brightened visibly whenever Mabel came to tutor. One day, Mabel read Alex a book about collecting things, and Alex told her he had never collected anything, but when she came back the next time, he told her he had started a shell collection. Unfortunately, the teacher noticed the progress Alex had made, and assigned Mabel to another student. Mabel was not allowed to work with Alex anymore, and this saddened both of them. However, whenever Mabel came into the class, Alex made it a point to tell Mabel how his shell collection was coming.

Finally, the last problem that I encountered was measuring my students' success. For example, it was clear from their responses to various questionnaires that the service raised esteem levels, improved communication skills, and helped my students to handle difficult situations (not to mention the benefits their mentees received). Also, my retention rate improved. Students reported that they were more motivated to come to class because we were discussing their service

experiences. This enabled them to be more actively involved. But next semester, I have decided that I will have my students work with children in the higher grade levels. Because the tutoring will be a bit more challenging, it will have more of an impact on my students' vocabulary and reading skills. In this way, I will be able to measure the success of the service as it relates to the course competencies.

**JOURNALS AND END PROJECTS**

As I have mentioned, I required my students to keep a journal that was broken up into four different sections. They were required to write in it every time they went to do their service. The first section was to include the date and time that they went and a brief description of what they did. The second section was for reflection. I gave them specific questions to use as guides for this section. They were asked to discuss their experience on that particular day, if they would make any changes next time, if they had any problems, etc. Then there were more general questions that they could also reflect on, such as the advantages and disadvantages of the project, whether their service experience was easy or challenging, and what they thought their most important contribution to their child was. The third section was reserved for the readings from the supplemental text we were using Writing For Change. In this section, they picked out and responded to a variety of articles from authors such as Marian Wright Edelman, John F. Kennedy, and Maya Angelou. The articles in the book discuss themes such as social reform, educational reform, environmental protection, and community service. By reading these articles, students were able obtain a more global view of how people can make a difference. The last section of their journals was to include their hour sheets, their end of the semester evaluations completed by their supervising teacher, and student satisfaction questionnaires that they filled out based on their experiences. All of these documents were given to them at the beginning of the term in the form of a Student Service Learning Handbook, provided by the Service Learning Center. In this section, I also asked them to put in any of their children's work, pictures, or letters of recommendation that they may have received from their teachers.

For their end projects, they were allowed to choose from three options. They could write a short, two paged typed paper summarizing their experience, give a three-five minute oral report, or do a creative response project. For the creative response project, they could write a poem or a short story, create a video, slide presentation, or even a collage. Among the creative responses I received were two collages, several poems, one piece of computer generated artwork, and video of my student leading a lesson in front of her children. The only problem some of my students ran into with this was that some of the schools did not allow them to take pictures of the children.

I was very impressed with the end projects. More than half of my students chose to do the oral report. I was shocked because most students tend to shy away from giving reports in front of a class, but my students actually wanted to share their experiences. During these reports, they asked each other questions and spoke candidly of their successes, problems, and triumphs with the children. One of the best reports was given by my student Xiang. She had been reluctant when she heard about the service learning component. She did not know how she was going to find the time between taking care of her one year old toddler, working, and studying for all her other classes. In fact, she almost dropped the class in the very beginning. And although she did decide to stay, she is one of the few students who chose not to work with All Aboard. Instead she chose to tutor adults in the ESL lab on Miami-Dade's campus. Having recently graduated from ESL

classes herself, she spoke of her nervousness and her doubt that she would be able to help the students in the lab. She wondered what she would do if they asked her a question she did not know. But her fears were put to rest on the first day when she realized she was able to help out and that she did have the information these students needed, and if she did not, the answers were easily accessible. Tutoring sharpened her own skills and helped her realize how far she had come from her own ESL days. At the end of the semester, her supervisor complimented her on a job well done and wrote her a glowing recommendation letter. The experience gave her self esteem a boost and helped her develop some much needed confidence in this area.

**REFLECTION SESSIONS AND BENEFITS**

I did not realize the full impact of service learning until my students had their first reflection session. I had scheduled two official sessions, but students were always stopping by my office to chat about their experiences. Even though holding these sessions in class was not ideal, it went pretty well. I divided the students into small groups so that everyone had the opportunity to talk. They had to introduce themselves and report what they had done so far. Then I assigned specific questions I wanted them to answer, so they wouldn't get off track. We then came together as a whole class for the last few minutes, so we could do some problem solving if need be, and also so they could share their experiences, good and bad.

I was amazed as I walked around and listened to them. They were so animated; they did not want to stop talking. They discussed how their students rushed over to them when they came in to tutor and the outpouring of love they received when they arrived. "It feels good to be so needed," one student said. Moreover, I had to chuckle when they said things like, "I have to be so patient because my student asks the same question over and over...." or, "They have such short attention spans; they want to be entertained because they are used to watching so much TV." If nothing else, my students certainly gained a healthy respect for a teacher's job. They had good tips for each other too. One of my students, Tikia, discussed how she had been having problems getting her child Derrick to pay attention. After a few really nerve racking sessions, Tikia started to design her lessons so that she would work on reading for about ten minutes and then let Derrick color or play a game for a few minutes. After she started doing this, things went much more smoothly.

Some of my students discussed how attached they had become to their mentees. One of my students in particular named Andre really connected with his child on a deeply personal level. His student, Kevin, lived with his grandmother. Kevin's parents were nowhere to be found, and he was always fighting and acting out. The teacher in the class had just about given up on him, and Kevin spent most of his time in Time Out. Andre said in his journal that he remembers being the same way and that it was only because he got involved with sports that he did not drop out of school. Andre worked hard with Kevin and said he would continue seeing Kevin even after he has finished with his volunteer hours.

Most importantly, my students learned the importance of volunteer work to the community. Many of my students wrote about over crowded classrooms, teacher burnout, and teachers too busy to give individualized help to those children who fall by the wayside. Some also wrote of the children telling them that their parents never read to them at home. All of my students said that they would continue to volunteer in some capacity after the class was over. Furthermore, the benefits for the children they tutored were profound. The younger children

were able to receive hours of individualized help they would probably not have gotten otherwise. Sometimes all a small child needs to get on the right track is a little support and attention. My students took pride in their contributions. Some even established relationships with the teachers and principals at their schools and have gone on to get jobs as aides, so job exploration became another benefit. As a matter of fact, I have several students who are now considering teaching as their major. On the other hand, I also had one student, Cherline, who thought she wanted to teach younger children. At the end of the semester, she told me she has now decided she wants to teach college because she lacks patience. It is much better she found this out in advance.

Finally, the last benefits I'd like to discuss are the ones I received. Participating in this service learning program has been a learning experience for me. I got to meet many of my colleagues who were also participating in the service learning program on my campus and on other campuses as well. Furthermore, I received all the support I needed from the Service Learning Center. Above all, this semester I have gotten to know my students better than any other. I feel closer to the students in these two classes than any before. We went on this journey together, and I found out that these particular students could be strong, caring, and sympathetic. I was impressed that even with everything they have to deal with, they still made time to give something back. We have all heard the phrase, "The best way to learn is to teach." This semester, my students taught their way to true learning.